The Roots Of Their Problem

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/37587520.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Rising (2007), Hannibal Lecter Tetralogy - Thomas Harris
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Freddie Lounds, Jack Crawford, Alana Bloom, Lady Murasaki (Hannibal Rising)
Additional Tags:	Mentioned Hannibal Lecter, Mentioned Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter's Past, Points of View, mentions of cannibalism, Mentions of Murder, duh - Freeform, Past Child Abuse, Canon Compliant, Mentioned Mischa Lecter
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Evil has no roots. But humans love to dig.
Stats:	Published: 2022-03-07 Words: 19,553 Chapters: 1/1

The Roots Of Their Problem

by CestPasDuBaudelaire

Summary

When Hannibal had disappeared after the death of the Dragon, he had left gapping wounds behind.

Gapping wounds that needed closures. And answers. Or simply juicy gossips.

That's what Alana Bloom, Jack Crawford and Freddie Lounds were hoping to find, as they climbed the steps leading to the house of Hannibal the Cannibal's adoptive mother.

Some said that tea could heal the soul after all.

Notes

Salut les gens !

A quick story without my usual pretention!
I was just curious after writing The Uneventful Past Of The Good Doctor Lecter, and wanted to explore that dynamic a bit more. So here is another take at it.
I still used the same "mixture of canons" than in the precedent fic. If you haven't read it, you may find divergences with what is said in the show (one divergence actually). It's because it's compliant to three canons, the show, the book and the movie. So I sometime favored some stuffs more than others. Hope it won't throw you off.

Usual mentions:
Beware of mention of death and cannibalism, obvi.
Also, a very blink-and-you'll-miss mention of incestuous feelings from a underage child toward his parental figure. But nothing is really said about it, it's even less than in the book/movie and, if I hadn't written this mention, I don't think many would have noticed. But I'm still doing it because I don't want anyone to be confronted with any triggering topic.
English is not my native language. Barely a part time lover. Mistakes ahead.

Anyway, hope you'll like that small thing. I didn't put as much time into it as into my other OS, but I think it is new enough, and unusual enough to be worth being posted.
Have fun!

See the end of the work for more notes

The Roots Of Their Problem

The castle was everything Freddie had envisioned.

High towers arrogantly piercing the sky, black tiles on white stones as if an old picture had been reproduced in the present, a pretentious display of Renaissance architecture prowess behind which gothic accents could be found in the severity of the arches and the melancholy of the statues.

Very much like Hannibal Lecter himself.

She took her camera out of her purse.

What a shame that the day was so bright and the sky so clear. She had found out that foggy aesthetics sold better for Lecter. For Graham, on the other hand, it was rain.

For her picture, she hid the sun behind the highest tower, as to create a threatening backlight. Maybe she could even edit some blur in before publishing. As to let believe it was an hard to get picture. And to compensate for the lack of fog.

“Already thinking about the title of your next article?”

Jack Crawford was right behind her, locking the car that had brought them here. His long black coat was giving him an air of sophistication and elegance. The exhaustion on his face, on the other hand, not so much.

“Oh, I already know.”

“Before even conducting the interview?”

The question and the disdain it didn’t hide were coming from Alana Bloom. She too was exhausted, though she had far better reasons to be than Crawford. The death knell of Hannibal’s promises was a heavy burden to carry.

“I need to think about the algorithm.”

“The algorithm?”

“The research algorithm. People have curiosities. It’s my duty to answer them.”

“You mean to choose the right keywords to make sure to pop up everywhere?”

“As a psychiatrist, you should know that words matter. Ex-psychiatrist, I mean.”

Alana didn’t answer while Jack, who had walked around the car, came to join them in front of the first steps leading to the elevated garden.

“So, what will it be?” he asked, his eyes fixed on the path ahead.

Neither of them had breathed a word to her during the whole ride here, and now, they wanted to chat.

“Hannibal: from child to cannibal? It rhymes, there is the double “c”, and “child” is often searched for in addition to “Hannibal Lecter”.”

Not as much as “spotted” or “nude” but much more than “new murder” or “killer”.

“Child? With Lecter?”

“People want to see pictures of him as a child. Or to know if he has one himself. People are obsessed with the roots of evil.”

“Well… we’re here to dig anyway.”

The three Americans stared at the castle.

Freddie had never been to the actual Lecter castle. The Lithuanian authorities had blocked and guarded its entrance the second its location had been made public. To prevent any morbid pilgrimage. But, from the pictures she had seen, Freddie thought that this one,

which was no *the* Lecter castle but *a* Lecter castle, seemed brighter and warmer. Maybe more human. Definitely more alive.

No cemetery but carefully arranged flowerbeds. No high fences but large shiny pools. No Lithuanian blizzard but the soft warmth of a French summer.

The Essonne was a sunny region in June. Nothing like the southern parts of the country, but it was still enough for Jack to open his coat and Freddie to readjust her sunglasses. Bloom remained concealed under the shadows of her hat, wary. Hiding and running were doing quite the number on her psyche.

"Let's remind what needs to be reminded" finally announced Jack while they started making their way toward the entrance at the end of the large path of small beige gravel. "You are not to say a word, Miss Lounds. That was our deal."

"We had no such deal, Agent Crawford. I simply said I would be discreet. But I have questions too."

"You are way over your head, here."

Lounds laughed it off. She had spent her career writing about monsters. It was very possible that she even had more experience with them than the dear old Jack himself.

"You would do well to keep in mind, Agent Crawford, that without me, the FBI wouldn't even know about this place."

"And without the FBI, you wouldn't have been invited in."

"I know, that's why I'll allow you to ask your questions too, Agent Crawford."

She had led her business cleverly. Like always. When she had finally discovered the identity and location of the woman she had been investigating for months, she knew she wouldn't be welcomed nor listened to, let alone answered. She had offered her intel to Jack under the condition that he would let her accompany him as a consulting agent of sorts.

Discreetly.

But not silently.

She had worked so hard and for so long, she was not about to let Jack's disdain for her ruin such a promising article.

Knowing that all had been said on the matter, they resumed their way in silence.

At least for a few steps.

“Doctor Bloom, would you mind answering a few questions once this interview is done? I am sure there is a lot you can tell us. My readers are very interested in Lecter’s romantic life.”

“That will be all, Miss Lounds” Jack cut.

“You alone, among the living, know how Lecter is in his intimacy. With Will Graham gone, and Bedelia du Maurier gone, you are the only one that is left.”

“We don’t know anything about Graham and du Maurier’s whereabouts” Jack once again intervened. “We have no more proof of their deaths than we have of their survivals.”

“Funny coincidences, though. Abigail once told me she suspected Graham to have a crush on you, Doctor Bloom. That’s quite the threesome. Do you think that’s why Lecter seduced you? As a way to punish Mr Graham for his misplaced feelings? Was it all just a jealousy tantrum?”

Doctor Bloom remained undisturbed, her feature set in cold stone, her eyes fixed on the castle. Normally it was by that time that Freddie would get a reaction. A burst, an enraged declaration that she could then use for her website. But here, nothing.

“You know, you may want to begin giving some answers, Doctor Bloom. Some are wondering if the feelings you had for Lecter are really all gone. That is the kind of rumors one doesn’t want to see spread about themselves.”

Alana laughed.

A dark, sarcastic laugh that echoed against the skin of stone of the statues around them.

“I live daily with Hannibal Lecter’s words over my head. I sleep among his shadows. And you threaten me with internet gossip? Come on, Freddie…”

Lounds observed Alana in silence for a couple of seconds.

“You really don’t have any hope left, do you?”

“I will have some. When Lecter will be dead.”

“And today,” interrupted Jack this time for good, “we have a unique opportunity to get closer to him. So don’t screw up.”

As they arrived near the door, they realized they weren’t alone in the garden. An old woman, around sixty, her arms strong and her skin burnt by the sun, was half hidden behind a topiary plant. Only the metallic sound of her shears betrayed her presence. She stared at them in silence, her brown eyes imperturbable.

“Nous sommes attendus par Dame Murasaki.”

Jack had said the only sentence in French he knew, the one he had learned on their drive here.

The gardener didn’t answer.

“Dame Murasaki,” Jack carefully enunciated. “Is Dame Murasaki here?”

For a while, the gardener remained silent, simply staring, then finally, she slightly moved her head to gesture toward the main door. Then, her eyes fell back on the topiary oeuvre she was working on, to not leave it again.

Freddie didn’t need further invitation. As a matter of fact, she was used to proceed with far less than that. She climbed up the steps of the perron and pushed the door.

The inside was much more colorful than the outside, though just as excessive. The cold white statues were replaced by paintings on the walls, creating a myriad of vivid colors and golden shimmers from the frames. A thick carpet was supposed to create a warm atmosphere, but it was so well maintained, so carefully cleaned that it was painful to dare to step on it. An alley of massive potted plants decorated the wall of the main door, their leaves carefully arranged so as to not obstruct the light from the windows. Opposed to them, two large twin stairs led up, framing a large open arch that revealed what seemed to be one of the

many living rooms. Two smaller doors opened on other rooms on this floor, but they were currently closed.

The openness of the hall, mixed with its large dimension, and the warmth of the dark wood covering the wall, created a much livelier feeling, far from the pictures Freddie had seen of the Lithuanian castle. She could envision herself living in some place like this one. Provided she were to win the lottery of course. Several times.

The sound of steps against the floor caught her attention. A man, just as old as the gardener but dressed much more expensively, was slowly making his way down the stairs.

“Uh… Excusez-moi” Jack called. “Nous sommes attendus…”

“… attendus par Dame Murasaki, j’ai entendu.”

The unknown man offered them the universal gesture meaning “follow me” and once at the bottom of the stair, turned right to pass through the large arch.

Freddie did her best to commit every detail to memory, but there was just too much to see. From the art, to the artefacts, to the trinkets, there was something to see on every shelf, something to notice on every wall. It was a house that had been lived in. It was the accumulation of a lifetime of daily occupation. Freddie would have needed a lifetime too to get to know its full story.

They were guided to another living room, smaller than the first one. It seemed more private and more secluded, with its cozy seats and its arranged incense. A woman was waiting for them there.

Lady Murasaki was very much not the mother Freddie had envisioned for Hannibal Lecter. Her mind – and writing – had explored two main possibilities: the absent, violent type and the overbearing, overloving one.

Freddie tended to favor the last. Of course, she was a journalist, and they were only hypotheses, the both of them. But Lounds had learned very early the power of words such as “may” or “could”, and she knew how to use headlines and lengths to favor one theory over another.

Why the overbearing one? Because it created more morbid fascination for the reader. No one could resist the idea of nature twisting itself to the point of monstrosity. And readers stuck more to toxic motherhood than to no motherhood at all.

Lady Murasaki was none of those two extremes, Freddie would soon realize. Which would annoy her, but she would chase away that thought rather quickly. Lady Murasaki was *only* the adoptive mother, after all. There were still places for hypotheses and suppositions. And there was that hope, that noisy omnipresent, gut-warming hope that she could dig *the* story, the hidden horror that no one could have envisioned. If such information were to be discovered, it would depend on skills and chance, as was everything in life. And if no such horror were to be found, then it would become a matter of imagination. And Freddie had a lot of it.

The first thing the journalist saw of the woman was her back. Straight and strong, unwavering. A strict disciplinarian? Had impossible standards been set for little Hannibal at a too young age? Had he been met too often with disappointment and punishment? If so, what kind of punishment? Was it twisted enough to entertain her readers?

Then Lady Murasaki had turned around and Lounds had changed her mind right away. She had inexpressive guarded eyes, inhabited by a strange coldness, yet there was an honesty to them. A kind clarity.

Freddie was good at reading eyes. She had spotted right away that something was instable, crumbling down inside the Profiler's mind. She was able to see Jack's disillusioned righteousness and Alana's fearful anger just in their eyes alone. She didn't always know how to interpret but she always had some kind of presentiment.

In Lady Murasaki's bright black eyes, Freddie could see two things: an exhausted wisdom, and the kind of guilt that only innocent people could create and harbor.

Whatever had fucked up Hannibal Lecter, his adoptive mother bear none of the responsibility yet all of the guilt.

"Good morning, Lady Murasaki."

Jack had stepped forward, ready to introduce them.

"I'm Jack Crawford, the man you had on the phone."

"Yes," acknowledged the woman and her voice was soft and low, barely a whisper, yet so confident that none would have dared to speak above it. "I recognized you from the newspaper. You are the man who caught him. And the man who let him go."

There was no aggressivity nor mockery in her voice. Freddie doubted she had ever displayed any in her life. No, once again, clarity and honesty. She was merely stating the facts known by all.

"This man indeed," answered Crawford, unphased. "And this is Doctor Bloom, a psychiatrist who had worked on the case, and this is Miss Lounds. A consultant."

Lady Murasaki didn't react to any of the names. They weren't recognized by her. Crawford had been all over the news after Lecter's apprehension and then his escape. But Bloom and herself had been secondary characters of the story. Secondary enough for Lady Murasaki to not know about them, it seemed. Which indicated one thing: the woman had not really taken an interest in her son's trial nor in his run.

Freddie made a mental note of that fact.

"You said on the phone that you were willing to answer our questions about Hannibal Lecter."

"I said," she corrected politely, "that I was willing to talk with you about him. That is what I agreed to."

"Let's talk, then."

She gestured toward the long sofa occupying the center of the room and Freddie sat down between Crawford and Bloom.

"Will you share some tea with me?" Lady Murasaki asked, while taking place in the armchair across them.

Her long black hair fell over her right shoulder. Freddie noticed the silver strands and the wrinkly skin around her eyes and mouth. Her age shined in all its beauty. She had yet to reach thirty when her husband adopted their thirteen years old nephew, but now, she was a woman who seemed to have led several lives. Or maybe a very long, very exhausting one.

Maybe, if she hadn't perpetrated the abuses, she had received them. It was the most shared hypotheses among the scientific community. That Lecter was simply born this way. And Freddie knew that counter-theories always attracted more than mainstream ones. Yet, a reverse abuse story, from a child toward a maternal figure… Yes, she could sell that.

Her eager curiosity was the reason why she cut short the niceties. She had indulged them at first. She knew how important they could be. She had drunk the tea, had supported Jack's polite compliments, and had even commented on the pleasantness of the weather when, really, she could hardly care any less about it. But a dozen minutes into the cordialities, she could tell that Lady Murasaki's trust wouldn't be won over that way, so there was really no point in even trying.

"Have you always known what he was?"

Crawford's disapproving side glance had no effect on her. She had been confronted with far worse in her line of work than disappointment, and nothing had ever made any lasting impression on her.

"And what is he, Miss Lounds?"

"A monster."

She did not hesitate. That much she knew. She had seen the pictures of his "oeuvres".

"A monster. Is that your professional opinion?"

"It is. Is it yours?"

"I don't have a profession."

"You are a mother. His. What's your opinion as a mother?"

Lady Murasaki had the same eyes as her son. Not in color. Her black iris had nothing to do with Lecter's reddish ones. What was similar was what they were giving off. Nothing. Nothing could be read. Nothing could be interpreted. As if the light would enter and never exit. No reflection to be noticed.

She first looked at Freddie, then her head slowly turned to the side, her gaze losing itself on one of the numerous paintings. An impressionist portrait of a woman bathing in a pond of water lilies.

“A monster” she finally resumed, “at least in the way you are using that word, would mean a failure at humanity. You can’t fail at standards that don’t apply to your reality.”

“You mean he is not human?”

It was Crawford who had asked. Blaming Freddie’s attempts yet using her results.

“I mean he is no monster.”

Philosophical ponderings on the nature of the human soul would lead them nowhere. Freddie had to aim for a more concrete fact. One she could write about. She needed stories, not theories.

“Was Hannibal Lecter sexually abused as a child?”

At once, Lady Murasaki’s gaze left the painting to stab Freddie’s eyes. The journalist didn’t know why, but the question had displeased the old woman. Deeply.

“What exactly are you being consulted on, Miss Lounds?”

“Oh, believe me,” Crawford interrupted, “after today, I will personally make sure that she will never be consulted again. On any matter.”

As if he had that power. If so, Tattle Crimes would have been shut down a long time ago.

“I don’t know.”

Lady Murasaki had ultimately answered the question.

“How can you not know?”

“How could I know?’

Again, this unfathomable immobility of her gaze. Freddie promised herself that one day, she would write about those eyes. Her reader liked that trope. That, somehow, internal monstrosity couldn’t come without some form of external betrayal. Which was untrue, according to Freddie’s experience. But it didn’t matter. If she was to be sued, she would claim poetic license.

“Well, you knew him as a child.”

“He never mentioned anything of that nature. But again, he had not mentioned the first thing about his life before the adoption. So even if he had known abuses of that sort, I don’t think he would have told us.”

“What about physical abuses?” Freddie insisted. “How were his biological parents?”

“They were not abusive.”

There was a coldness in her voice, an untold threat looming over that matter, ready to trigger Lady Murasaki’s implacable anger.

“We should just take it from the beginning.”

Crawford had immediately jumped in to diffuse both Freddie’s line of questioning and Murasaki’s possible retaliations.

“How old was he when you met him for the first time?”

It was Alana’s soft voice that distracted the tensed attentions.

“Two days old.”

“You were there for his birth?”

“Nearly. We shouldn’t have been. We wanted to leave the young parents alone for the first few weeks. But Hannibal arrived nearly a month late.”

“You knew his parents?”

“Yes. We had not spent a lot of time with them, but meeting them once was enough to never forget about them. They were solar in that particular way.

“But not that close?”

“Geographically, no.”

“So, your husband was the brother of Hannibal’s father, right?” resumed Freddie.

“Yes.”

“And how was the relationship between the two brothers?”

“You seem convinced that whatever is wrong with Hannibal, it comes from them.”

“You seem convinced it doesn’t.”

Once again, Lady Murasaki’s focus drifted from them to the painting behind them.

“Robertus loved his older brother. He admired him more than anyone else. But there was some distance between them.”

There was no need to ask further questions, the old woman resumed at her own pace.

“I think Robertus has never understood why his brother had decided to stay in Lithuania. The country that had executed their father and deported them to a forced settlement. He couldn’t understand that his brother, who had the possibility to flee, to live and thrive elsewhere, had gone back. And had decided to raise his child there.

“And, after what happened to him, to his wife and child, Robertus’ incomprehension had turned into anger. In his eyes, every tragedy that happened after that was because of that choice. Robertus had lost his brother and it was his brother’s fault.”

“How did they die? We found no trace of them in official accounts.”

“I don’t know.”

Freddie frowned at that. First, she hadn't followed the story of her adoptive son's imprisonment. Now, she hadn't investigated the death of her brother and sister-in-law. Maybe she could go for the "negligent mother" story, all in all.

"You weren't curious?" she asked, keeping her personal suspicion out of her voice.

"I was not curious. I was concerned and grieving. But the only one who knew what had happened was Hannibal. And he couldn't tell us."

"Couldn't or wouldn't?"

"Couldn't. He didn't remember. At least, he didn't at first. And, when he eventually did, he kept saying he didn't."

"You didn't press him for an answer?" asked Crawford. "Even though you suspected he was lying?"

"Why for?"

"To understand what happened to your sister and brother-in-law."

"They were my friends, and I cried them. But I had lost them. The truth couldn't bring them back. What it could do was to cost me my nephew. A little boy that was very much alive. It wasn't a risk I was willing to take."

"So, even now, years later, you still have no idea what happened to Lecter's family?"

"No idea."

Freddie wasn't sure she believed Lady Murasaki. But she knew the old woman had nothing more to say on the subject. And the two others must have reached the same conclusion for the matter was dropped.

"How was he, during the first few days after his adoption?"

Alana's voice was rare in the conversation, and it captured the focus of everyone in the room.

"I didn't get to see him during the first few days."

She brought her cup, now cold, to her lips but didn't drink from it. As if she was too far in her memories to realize what she was even doing, simply acting out of habits rather than of needs.

"One night, I came home, and Robertus wasn't there. Amélie, our gardener, told me that he had left in a hurry. Something about his family. I learnt later that Hannibal had simply appeared in front of the house one evening, with nothing but a couple of letters in his hand. Unsent letters written by my brother-in-law. We had not learned from him in nearly four years, but they had never been rigorous in their correspondence. Barely an annual letter."

"And what did Lecter say?"

"Which one?"

"The nephew. To the uncle."

"Nothing. He gave the letters, threw up and fainted. He was still unconscious when Robertus brought him to the hospital."

"He was sick?" Freddie asked.

"He was in a bad state. He had walked from Vilnius to Paris in nearly two months. Spending most of the winter on the street. He was hurt, some of his wounds were infected. He was dehydrated, famished, and exhausted. They kept him at the hospital for a week. When I saw him for the first time since his birth, it was when Robertus brought him home. I knew he was supposed to be thirteen, but he looked barely older than eight."

"Where did his wounds come from?"

"From fights, from what they said. Some knife wounds but superficial. Older scars too. Not threatening. The worst he had was a bullet which had brushed his arm. It touched nothing but skin and a bit of flesh, but it got infected. Therefore, the heavy fever that had been the most worrying issue."

"A bullet? How did that happen?"

"Once again, Hannibal never said a word about it. But from what we guessed; it must have happened when he had crossed the Berlin wall. If that's the case, he was lucky he got away so easily."

"What did he answer your questions?" asked Jack. "Had he said why he didn't want to talk about it?"

"What you must understand is that, during the first three months we had him, Hannibal didn't say a single word. He would barely eat. He would simply sit and wait."

"Didn't that creep you out?"

Lady Murasaki's obvious disdain for Freddie was continuing to grow, but she seemed extremely skillful at keeping it polite.

"We are talking about a child," she simply highlighted.

"We're talking about Lecter," countered Freddie.

The old woman put down the cup without making a sound, even though she hadn't drunk from it at all.

"No, I wasn't frightened. I was simply relieved he was alive and safe with us. If he didn't want to talk, so be it."

"Three months are a lot," commented Jack. "You didn't think of bringing him to a specialist?"

"We did. The week after his release from the hospital."

"And? What did they say?"

"They tested him for catatonia. They used a scale."

"The Bush-Francis Scale?" asked Alana right away.

"Yes, that one."

"How much did he score?"

"27."

"Care to explain?"

Freddie was glad Jack had asked the question. She was about sure Alana would have ignored her if she had done the same.

"It's a questionnaire to evaluate the severity of catatonic states. 27... It's not good. That's barely responsive."

"They said he had catatonia, and selective muteness," resumed Murasaki. "They also tested him for other related conditions, and found none. No schizophrenia, no mood disorder. He simply... didn't want to interact with the world."

"He was hospitalized?"

"No. Robertus fought against it. He thought his nephew needed a home more than a doctor. I think he was right. They agreed. He was able to drink the water we put in front of him. He could stand up and walk, if we were patient enough. He could survive without any supervision. He was perfectly able to live with us, and the doctors agreed. They just gave us drugs and asked us to send him to therapy. And we did that. The drugs did nothing, we stopped them soon enough. The therapy, I am not sure. But after about three months, he started to talk and eat again. Two months after that, it was as if nothing had happened. He was growing up fast, eating like any child his age would, and would talk with a near perfect French. The therapist said that could happen with children. They could just... outgrow their problems."

"And what kind of character did he have?" Jack wondered. "Once he began to talk again."

"He was very well behaved. With us, at least. School had not worked out and..."

"What do you mean?"

Freddie had interrupted Murasaki, as she could always tell when a good story was about to be told.

"He had been expelled. He had fought against another kid. Violently."

"Do you know the reason for the fight? Was the kid older or younger than him? Had Lecter used something else than his hands? And what was the reaction of the other kids? Were they frightened? Impressed?"

"Is this... relevant?"

"Not at all," interrupted Jack. "Let’s just go back to what we were saying."

Freddi barely prevented her teeth from grinding. Maybe she should have found another way in rather than call Crawford. Him stepping in every few questions was preventing her from doing her job. And damn if she was about to let that happen.

"He was homeschooled," resumed Murasaki. "He spent his days at home with me and my other student. He was a very polite boy. He would always do what was expected of him before we even had to ask him. He was very respectful, always listening with all his focus. He was... I don't know if he was kind. But he never acted cruelly. Not with us."

"So you never suspected that something could be wrong with him?"

Murasaki didn't answer. For a second, her eyes lost themselves somewhere along the diffracted reflections of herself on the surface of her untouched tea. Then they slowly traveled back to the painting. As if comparing the two images.

"Lady Murasaki?"

"His parents, they were something."

None understood where that was coming from, but they let her continue.

"Robertus told me that every Lecter was exceptional in their own ways. I think he may have been right. Hannibal's father, he was a magnetic man. The kind of person you want to rely on, you want to confide in. He would smile, and right away, the world would feel like a safer place. His mother, she was wise. She knew herself, and she knew the world. As if all the answers were whispered to her. As if she could hear some quieted meaning, she could see some hidden pattern in the structure of life. They were two exceptional beings. And Hannibal... Hannibal was their Magnum Opus. I remember that, the first time I saw him, sleeping in his mother's arms, I thought to myself that he was the most blessed two-days-old to have ever breathed the air of this earth, and that he would grow up to become a being beyond what could be imagined. And I was right.

"Still as of today, he has all the wisdom and clarity of his mother. And of his father, he has the face, the eyes, and the smile. But as for his intelligence... His intelligence is his own. If you think you know how his mind works, reconsider. If you think you're able to follow his thoughts, reconsider. Hannibal evolves in spheres outside of your dimensions. The paths of his thoughts cross impenetrable lands of the imagination. And those paths, he walks them at a speed that can't be matched by human legs.

“You want to know if I knew there was something different in him? I knew. Right away. The second he crossed the threshold behind Robertus. He was so small, so scrawny in the shadow of his tall, eccentric uncle. But I had the exact same thought as I had when I saw this baby against his mother's breast. I knew that this little boy would grow up to become something beyond what imagination could picture.

"When he began to talk to us. It's when I realized he already was. Did I know, back then, that something was wrong. Maybe. I could tell he wasn't saying his mind, for his mind was unintelligible. Only when he wasn't saying anything, I could catch a glimpse of it.

"I know you noticed too. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here. But his silences are deep, aren't they? When Hannibal is quiet, a lot is being screamed in ranges that your ear can't intercept. Something moves around him when he keeps silent. This motion you can feel but

never see, this pressure against your skin, it is the weight of Hannibal's mind. Just as the swimmer feels when the creature of the deep moves underneath them, we know when Hannibal's mind vibrates behind the immobility of his eyes.

“And this mind... Yes, I believe he had it back then. I believe he was born with it. But when you're asking if he was already monstrous - and by monstrous you mean inhuman - then... Yes. And no. He was monstrous even back then, but only monstrous in his abilities. Monstrous in his possibilities. His perverted character, his twisted whims, that is something that was imposed on him. Something that, no, I didn't notice at the time where he was living under my roof."

"So, it's not his fault?" asked Freddie. "The killing, the torturing, the eating. All the people that had lost their life and reason. It's because the world was not nice enough with him. Nothing is because of him."

"Those are the exact words I did not say," calmly pointed out Lady Murasaki. "He is guilty of every act he ever committed. The sole culprit. I blame him for what he does. But I don't blame him for what he is."

"And what is he, then?" Alana wondered. "If he is not a monster."

"What he is now is not the same as what he was then, back when he was living with us. Then, he was the unfortunate encounter between inhuman abilities and twisted upbringing. Now… Now he is a laughing God. Nothing more complex than that. Age made him lose depth.”

Poetic bullshit. That was Freddie’s opinion on the question. Lecter was no God, and Murasaki no Virgin Mary. And the journalist needed to either burst this bubble, or find answers on her own. Because she was not about to write some Byronic soppiness for her readers.

“Did your nephew kill your husband?”

If she thought she had angered Murasaki before, it was nothing compared to now. Her politeness did not move. But something changed behind her black eyes. No more clarity. No more guilt. But an inscrutable sink of darkness ready to draw all the light of the room.

“I beg your pardon.”

It was a threat. Freddie had never been good with them. Never found it in her to care.

“Certainly, you must have wondered. The correlation of the dates. Your husband died not even a year after Lecter’s adoption, didn’t he?”

“Miss Lounds. A word.”

That damn Crawford again! But Freddie knew she could get nothing more than empty poetry from the old lady. If the FBI was willing to waste its time on her, it was fine by her book. She stood up and followed Jack outside the room. He had barely closed the door when he turned to her.

“What game are you playing here?”

“What game is *she* playing. Don’t you see, Agent Crawford? She is giving us nothing. We’re asking if Lecter was already fucked up by the time he was adopted, she talked about the nature of the human soul. We’re asking what happened to his parents, she says that she doesn’t know because she feared for Lecter’s salvation. For whatever reason, she is leading us astray. And you’re wondering what game *I* play? Well, *I* am asking questions. Questions that matter. When you’re doing small talk. If she’s not going to answer, then we’re wasting our time.”

“If it is the case, then I would rather have you waste your time in the car.”

“You’re kidding me…”

“Take a long good look at my face and tell me if it’s the face of someone who currently feels like kidding.”

“You can’t…”

“I can and I do. I said it. I won’t let you screw this up. That was you screwing things up. So that is me kicking you out. Go wait in the car, Miss Lounds.”

“You’re gonna regret this.”

“Have fun with that.”

Freddie let go of her false offended face the second Jack turned his back at her. She was able to recognize dead-ends when faced with them, and when someone wasn’t willing to give her the answers she was looking for, then she had to find them on her own.

And her journalist’s guts were telling her that the house may have more stories to tell than its mistress.

So she walked away from the remote living room but she did not go anywhere near the car. Instead, she climbed the stairs. More often than not, the past was stored in the attic.

Attics, in the case of this castle-like mansion. Freddie couldn't be more relieved that Jack seemed willing to indulge Murasaki's meaningless monologues. She needed all the time he could get her.

The first room she checked out didn't teach her much. It was filled, from the floor to the ceiling, with painting materials: old canvas – some half-finished, some still blank -; hundred of small cans of paints, with different brands, different colors, most seemed home-made; boxes of brushes showing all states of wear and tear; long stained protective tarps and clothes that once must have a defined color.

Robertus Lecter had been a rather well-known painter, met with artistic and financial success throughout his life. Those must have been his. Freddie couldn't remember even one oeuvre signed by the Doctor that used paints. He was more of a pencil kind of guy. Or blood. Depending on the kind of oeuvre we were talking about. She looked around to make sure she wasn't missing anything, and then she moved on to the next room.

She found there a melting pot of old belongings left here to be forgotten. The first thing that caught her eyes was the numerous boxes of clothes. Among the man and woman clothes that must have been very fashionable forty years ago, she could spot glimpses of child's shirts and shoes. Freddie walked right to them and found there four packages labeled with nothing more than a capital "H".

Well, well, it seemed that the Little Cannibal had been very expensively dressed as a child. Tailor-made vests, shirts from the snobbiest fashion houses of France and Italy, ties in the softest of silk, pullover in the freshest of cashmere; some items seemed to have barely been worn – the perks of spending half a salary on a pair of pants for a growing boy. All that ostentatious display was creating a picture far from the poor, feverish boy walking from Lithuania to France, living on the street and running on sheer luck.

On the other hand, Lady Murasaki had not lied about the boy. If truly he had been thirteen when they had adopted him, and bought him all those clothes, then he had been extremely tiny for his age. Such significant growth delay, if the main health conditions like hormone deficiency or hypothyroidism were ruled out, was often due to severe or persistent malnutrition. However, Hannibal Lecter was a tall man, even compared to the average European man. Which meant, if indeed he had been thirteen when those clothes had been bought, and if indeed his shortness had been caused by malnutrition, that he had remarkably caught up. Lady Murasaki and her husband had had to give him a very different life for that to happen, a drastic improvement in his condition was in order for such a change to take place. His adoption had been a true blessing for the boy. And a curse for the world. It was highly probable that, if no one had taken him in, the boy would have died before becoming old enough to live up to his monstrous potential.

Freddie Lounds was about to put everything back to its place when she noticed something at the bottom of one of the packages. It stuck out by the poverty of its quality. Like hemp cloth in a sea of satin. She pulled it out of the box and the fabric nearly disaggregated between her fingers.

It was a jacket, as small as the oldest clothes she had found but in a much worse state. It had been green a long time ago. At least, Freddie thought. But nothing of that color was left to be seen. It had faded into an exhausted old grey, and then stains after stains had given him a brownish hue. And the color was hardly the most noticeable proof of the jacket's poor quality. The fabric itself was thin and worn to the thread; under her skin, it felt like rough cardboard that had been soaked over and over again. The stains were another matter altogether. It was barely possible to tell their provenance. Some looked like mud, some like mold, and some like ash. There was blood, that much was sure. On the sleeve, where a part of the fabric was missing, the edge of the hole burned and black. On the front, where a bleeding nose or a bleeding mouth had dirtied the fabric. Some droplets around the cuffs where bruised fists had clenched the too large cloth to keep the cold out. The front buttons were nearly all missing, only two still there to keep the jacket closed. On the back, she noticed some traces of letters that used to be sewed there. The letters themselves had all been lost, but it was possible to guess the edges of some of them. It was three words. Of the word, she could guess the three first letters: S-O-V. Of the second, she had the beginning N-A-S-L with a strange looking dot over the S, and the end Y-S-T-E, with once again a strange mark over the E. As of the last one, it was the only one decipherable. Vilnius.

Freddie took a picture of it. She had no idea what the whole sentence, or name could mean and had low hope of finding out, but one never knew. It was telling her something, though, and that was that this jacket had certainly been a uniform of some kind.

It smelled like lavender and chamomile. It had clearly been washed thoroughly. Freddie couldn't picture how it must have looked like, when the little Lecter had worn it, the day he met his uncle.

She eyed it for a while after that. She knew it was quite an item. For sure, numerous weirdos on her blog would be willing to pay a small fortune to have that piece of History. But Freddie was no thief. She had principles and a deontology. Regretfully, she put it back on the top of the package. But, as she raised, she took her phone out once again and snatched a picture. The bloody, dirty, ragged jacket among the expensive tailor-made shirts. It could be a nice picture to illustrate her next article.

Once she was done with the closes, she took a look around, to the rest of the stored belongings. She quickly disregarded the few electronics, the mismatched pieces of computers which couldn't have possibly belonged to a growing Hannibal, the record player which, on the other hand, seemed to be as old as the house itself, or the forgotten cables and battery of all possible origins. Those would have taught her nothing and she had to maximize her time. She had already wasted too much, and she had no idea when the discussion downstairs would be over.

She spotted, in the remote corner of the room, neatly ordered boxes of papers. Letters, official documents, articles, something important and revealing could be written in one of

them. She made her way to it, climbing over some more packages of clothing. As she should have guessed, nearly none were in English. She recognized some French, and what she guessed was Lithuanian, but not a word she could understand. She spent dozens of minutes rummaging through them, trying to find anything she could make sense of. But apart from a handful of letters from galleries in London and New York asking to expose the uncle's work, she found nothing in English.

She was about to give up, cursing the mere idea of foreign languages, and maybe go back downstairs to avoid getting caught, when her eyes got distracted by some vivid colors in one of the smallest boxes, mostly hidden behind the one she was currently searching. She put aside the umpteenth unreadable private correspondence of the artist to check out that smaller stack. She was not disappointed. Child's drawing. Those were always the best. She pulled the box to her, placing it between her crossed legs, and looked at the content.

She knew right away the drawings were from Hannibal, without even looking at the name shyly written at the bottom right. She had seen his drawings before. She had been to his office, and Chilton had published some in his books about him. Even though she had a very narrow knowledge of art, she was able to tell they were good. They looked... skillful. Those looked skillful too, though much more youthful.

She checked the date at the bottom, near the name, and it told her Hannibal had to be around four when he had drawn them. Most of them represented observable elements, far from the antic scenes and renaissance concepts Lecter liked to create as an adult. Most of the drawings could show birds, and trees, and ponds. A castle that seemed to be a recurring theme. A man and a woman, always smiling, always holding each other's hands. Wildflowers in endless gardens. Large windows letting the sun enter. A yoyo flipping through the air. All pictures that must have accompanied Hannibal's early childhood to the point where it was how the world was like to him. Though he was not yet the precise drawer he now was, it was still astonishingly detailed and realistic for a four years old. Except for the colors. The colors were always off. Too vivid, too warm, too overpowering, badly delimited so they would constantly overlap and blur into each other. As if the child had tried to fit every single one of his colored pencils, not wanting to let even one out. Though he clearly liked yellow, orange and pink more than the other colors.

The oldest drawing, the boy must have been about three according to the date and, in the least old, he must have been about five. Nothing ulterior to that. As if the child had abruptly stopped drawing after that. Or, more probably, the parents had stop sending their son's art.

While digging deeper into the box, she found the letters that had certainly accompanied the drawings. All in Lithuanian, signed either by a S or an A. She couldn't understand a single sentence, but Freddie noticed that the name "Hannibal" was overly featured in all of those letters. If she had to make a guess, she would say that those were the typical letters of adoring parents bragging about their kid's existence. She took a picture of a couple of them, in case their translation could teach her anything, and then put them aside to discover the bottom of the box. Where she found what she hadn't hoped for.

Pictures. Of Hannibal the Cannibal. As a child.

She didn't waste a second and jumped on them, greedily ripping them off the box. There were only seven pictures, but it was more than any journalist had ever found about Lecter.

The first one was dated to the Monster's supposed year of birth. Supposed as no one had any official paper to prove it. But now, Freddie had that picture. It showed a woman, sitting crossed legs on the grass. She was holding a brush, and was certainly painting on a canvas left off-frame. On her legs, a baby, that must have been about six months old, was sitting. He had his head against his mother's breast, keeping him upright, and his mother's hand was around his waist, to prevent him from slipping or falling. He was wild awake, his eyes, gigantic on his baby face, filled with wonders. But he wasn't looking at the painting in progress. His head was too raised for that to be the subject of his amazement. No, actually, what he was looking at was the cascade of light that was the woman's hair, his tiny hand reaching out to try to grab it. He had a bit of paint on the tip of his nose, where a playful finger had teased it.

The second picture was a much stranger one. Dated two years later, during summer. It was a boy - the same, Freddie ventured - now two years and a half. He was inside this time, but the picture, taken from above and directed toward such a short subject, didn't show anything of the room except the thick carpet. The boy was sitting, books discarded all around him. He had one open in front of him, though, and he was looking at it intensely. The book itself was not one that should be found between baby's hands. It was large and heavy, covered in leather, and tiny writings. It looked like an encyclopedia or one of those insufferably boring books. But, what was unsettling, was the toddler's face. It was focused, and pensive. Now, Freddie knew it was impossible, she knew it was just an effect of her imagination. But something in her gut was telling her that it was not the face of a boy mimicking his parents. It wasn't a boy playing grown-up and pretending to read. She could see it in the lowered eyes. A glimmer of wondering. She knew it was ridiculous, but she could tell the boy was actually reading.

The third picture was one that would more easily be found in a family album than the one before. Freddie first thought it was a much more recent picture, featuring a definitely adult Lecter. It took her a few seconds of blank staring before she realized that the man that looked so much like the Monster had to be the father. He was holding his son against his chest, his eyes carefully lowered on him, watching over him with great focus. The boy, now three, had one small hand clenched on his father's vest, certainly to reassure him, and the other was reaching out to what seemed to be the head of a horse. His eyes betrayed his worries, yet he seemed fascinated by the animal in front of him and the beginning of a smile was visible on his lips.

On the next one the boy was four. It was the first picture that couldn't have been taken by one of the parents, since both were on it. It showed a large grand piano, at which the boy was sitting. His legs were far too short to reach the pedals, but his fingers were definitely hitting the keys. The father and the mother could be seen at the other side of the piano, embracing each other as if in the middle of a waltz. The father had his eyes fixed on his wife, his smile clearly visible behind his carefully trimmed moustache, his adoration readable everywhere on his face. The mother was against his chest, one hand on his hand, her head on his shoulder. Her face was turned toward her son, and she seemed in the middle of a laughter. The boy, as for him, had his eyes fixed on his finger, his face focused and guarded, completely disregarding his parents' dance and obvious love. As if it was something that he could see daily and which wasn’t worth noticing anymore.

The fifth picture jumped two years and was rather simple. The boy, now six, sitting in an armchair far too big for him. On his laps, a bundle of blankets among which a minuscule baby face could be spotted. The boy, his hands holding the bundle safely against his chest, had his eyes straight on the objective, as if asking the photographer what exactly he was doing here.

Freddie stopped at that picture. Was that supposed to be... a sibling? No one had ever mentioned any sibling before. Nearly nothing was known about Lecter's childhood but all had more or less presumed that he had been an only child. That was big. Anxiously, she looked at the next picture.

A year after. The picture had been taken outside. The castle Freddie had seen drawn over and over again was visible in the background but what captured her attention was the scene being played. A big black swan, his wings spread out like a cloak, facing two children. The first one, standing tall despite his short height, was holding a long stick in his hand, as if to match the swan's wingspan. He seemed more annoyed than afraid. The second child, a toddler really, was hidden behind the first one, her hands gripping his shirt, her face shoved against his back. It was a striking scene to see the boy, barely seven, stand up to protect his sibling against the wild animal. It was the kind of act every parent dreamed their older child would do for their younger one.

The seventh and last. Once again, a year later. Probably the customary annual check-up with the picture of the children sent to the uncle and aunt. On this one, the boy was eight, and the girl two. Both of them were outside, sitting on the floor, their legs spread in front of them. The boy was dressed in an impeccable white shirt and darker sweater, with dark shorts and shoes, and knee-high socks. The perfect well-mannered boy from good family and wealth. The girl was in a white Sunday dress, long and spinning like children tended to like them. She had colored ribbons in her hair. Freddie couldn't tell the colors, but they were vivid and mismatched, answering more a child's whim than a parent's choice. Both children had

their back against what seemed to be the wall of a church, judging by the Christic stained-glass above their head. Both of them were holding a book. The boy, his eyes focused, was reading a large volume titled "Metamorphoseon libri" by Publius Ovidius Naso. Freddie had no idea what the text was about but it seemed to be captivating the boy completely. The girl, on the other hand, was holding a coloring book upside down, mimicking her brother's position perfectly, even nailing the air of wonder and reflection on his face.

The picture could have been cute if it hadn't featured a completely insane sociopathic Cannibal.

It was all there was in this box, but it was much more that Freddie had dreamed of. She took a picture of all that she found and, knowing she had already wasted too much time and fearing to be caught, she walked toward the exit.

However, once at the top of the stairs, she hesitated. There were three rooms in the attic, and she had only visited two. She clearly didn't have time for a third one but... could a quick look really hurt anyone.

Deciding against going back to the car, she quickly turned around and opened the third door. Whatever was in that room had not been left here to be forgotten, Freddie was able to say that much the second she entered the pitch-black space. It didn't smell musty and dusty like the two other rooms, it smelled like clove and Lady Murasaki's perfume. This room was still a living part of the house.

Freddie nearly jumped out of her skin when she turned on the light. A masked face a few inches from hers. Its dead eyes watching her.

Freddie stumbled backwards and nearly fell against the wall.

After a few seconds of sheer panic, she realized that the mask wasn't moving. And that the dead eyes were actually an absence of eyes. She gathered her wit and stepped forward again.

The room was small. Much smaller than she had guessed. And only accommodating one object. A better look at it taught her it was actually a huge samurai armure, in front of which a small altar had been placed. The black lacquered iron plates were shining under the bulb, showing with which care they had been washed and protected throughout the centuries. A long, threatening katana was resting in the lifeless hands of the armor.

On the altar in front of them, pictures and candles had been organized. Freddie crouched down to get a better look. There were four pictures. One, very old, very damaged, yet very cared for, showed a couple, newly wedded, formally standing next to each other in what seemed to be traditional clothes. Freddie was willing to bet that it was Lady Murasaki's parents. Two candles had been placed in front of it. The second one, she recognized the faces instantly from the other pictures she had seen minutes ago. The Cannibal's mother and father. Younger than they had been when they had had their son. Freddie didn't know if they were married at that point, but they seemed barely over eighteen, yet already deeply in love. Two candles had been placed in front of it. The third picture showed Lady Murasaki herself, sitting in a high-backed chair. By her side, her husband Robertus, a hand on her shoulder, a smile huger than what that formal picture should have allowed. One candle had been placed in front of it. Once lit, it would illuminate Robertus' silhouette, leaving Murasaki out of its glow. Casting a light on the dead, and a shadow on the living.

And finally, the fourth picture. Two faces, once again. Much younger. Hannibal, eight of age, sitting on a small rock, was looking straight at the camera, a smile on his lips, and joy in his eyes. Behind him, his sister. Her arms around her brother's shoulder, hugging him with all her baby strength. Her chin resting against the hollow of his neck. Her muddy fingers staining his white shirt. Her vivid colored ribbons floating around their heads. She seemed just as happy as her brother. Just as eager to see tomorrow.

Golden.

Freddie took out her phone and snatched another picture. Only once she had put it back in her pocket she noticed the two extinguished candles. One for Hannibal's sister. One for Hannibal himself.

It had been too long. She had been careless. But her trip in the attic had been worth taking the risk of being caught. She stood up, closed the door carefully, and quickly went to the stairs to walk them down. She actually managed to reach the front door without being caught. But once in the gardens, she realized Jack was already outside. He was in the middle of the main alley, walking from one side to another, visibly very unhappy. Yet, that anger didn't seem to be directed against Freddie as, when he noticed her, it took him several seconds to understand what he was seeing. He obviously hadn't been looking for her, maybe hadn't even realized she hadn't been in the car. He seemed a bit short on breath and was holding a white envelope in his clenched fist.

"What is that?" Freddie asked, pointing toward the envelope.

"You have some nerves to ask anything to me, Miss Lounds?" he answered right away, his anger rising exponentially. "I don't remember parking the car indoors."

"I needed to use the bathroom. Do you want me to give you more details or are we keeping it at that?"

"I hope you really enjoyed the little stunt that you pulled. Because, trust me, I will unleash upon you a true judicial hell you will never see the end of."

She could tell a rightful anger apart from a redirected one. And clearly, Crawford's wrath didn't care much about Freddie. Yet, the journalist knew better than to argue or try to outsmart the agent. She didn't fear him, but Jack was not a man to be mocked or provoked.

"Now," Jack continued after her silence, "if you try again to tell me that..."

"No need to use threats you'll come to regret, Agent Crawford. I am done here. If you have everything that you want, I'm ready to go."

And, with those words, she left the man alone with his thoughts and anger, and walked to the car. She didn't know where Alana was, but she didn't want to stay in this house any longer. She had made it out with all her pictures, she now needed to upload them to save them in her computer where they couldn't be taken from her.

Jack didn't follow her. Now deprived of its victim, his anger either died out or, more probably, had been internalized. His walk slowered, and, finally, he sat done on the steps in front of the mansion. From where she was, she could see him open the envelope and take out the letter. Her curiosity was poked, but she had currently no desire to ask any question to Jack. She was audacious, not suicidal.

She simply turned away from him and, sitting against the hood of the car, she waited for the agent and the doctor to be done with their own personal journey so they could all head home and either think, write or worry about Hannibal the Cannibal

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Thirty minutes ago

"Please excuse her. You know how sensitive people can get about Hannibal Lecter."

Crawford mentally cursed the day Freddie Lounds had entered his life. He should have never accepted her shameless deal. Of course, she would be a liability during a situation as important and delicate as this one. He just hoped that she was now indeed heading to the car and not snooping around where she really shouldn't.

Lady Murasaki didn't answer, simply nodding to acknowledge his apology. Once he was back on the sofa next to Alana, she nonetheless resumed.

"Hannibal did not kill his uncle. He loved him. Much more than you could possibly give him credit for."

"I am sure of that," temporized Jack.

He could see a bit of Hannibal in the old lady. In the nobility of her bearing and the control of her gaze. Just like her son, she was not one to be disrespected. Not one to be provoked. Yet, there was a softness to her, a gentleness her son lacked. There was a veil of remorses behind her eyes that Hannibal had never displayed in any way.

"He was good to him. Robertus. He seemed to simply... know."

She folded the front of her dress against her chest, so as to keep the warmth to her.

"When Hannibal arrived at our home, we weren't ready. There was another child here, but I was her teacher. Not her family. Robertus and I... We never taught about having children. It wasn't who we were. It wasn't what we wanted for us. But Hannibal arrived. And, in a day, I was asked to step in as a mother. Me. A mother. It was laughable. But he was there, and I knew that no one was going to take him from us. That no one would care if we didn't.

"I don't think you understand how difficult the first few months were. You must understand... he wasn't communicating. At all. He wasn't reacting. He wasn't interacting in any way. Everything was a struggle. Every step, even the most daily, the most anecdotical, was a fight. What other parents could do without a thought, we had to put all of our energy into it. We never knew when he was tired, when he was afraid, when he was sad or hurt. We never knew what he wanted, and what he hated. Everything was but an exhausting guessing game. Getting him to eat even half a meal a day was one of the biggest ordeals I have been met with during my lifetime. Even the simplest of tasks. Dressing him up, walking in the

gardens, sleeping at night. It was fight, after fight, after fight. Fight against ourselves. Not against him. No, him... He would simply stare. And wait. Wait for us to catch on. Wait for us to finally be good with him. Or wait for us to give up. Even after all those years, I don't know. But I felt like I was never enough."

She had talked in a soft whispered voice, yet Jack could tell those were words she had often repeated herself without being able to share them with anyone.

"Motherhood is never as easy as they want us to think. And mothers are made to feel ashamed when recognizing the hardships. As if unworthy. We held mothers to a high standard of stoicism. An impossible one."

Lady Murasaki's slow black eyes fell on Alana.

"You are a mother."

It wasn't a question, yet Crawford could see that Alana hesitated to admit it. He himself had very little knowledge of the whereabouts of the Verger-Bloom child. Alana was fiercely protecting her family since Lecter had run away. Yet, she must have seen something in Murasaki's eyes. A kinship. Because she nodded.

"What is the name?"

"Morgan. His name is Morgan."

"It's a sweet name."

Lady Murasaki observed Alana in silence for a few seconds, and Jack could tell that he had no place in that conversation.

"He was well-behaved," she resumed. "So polite. So respectful. He would never disobey. But he was so difficult. So worrying. So exhausting. I knew it wasn't his fault. I knew he had been through hell and that it was a miracle he was alive with us. But... it was each time at the limits of my strength. And I hated myself for blaming him."

"It wasn't your fault. No more than it was his."

Crawford frowned. He, of all people, knew the hatred Alana reserved for Hannibal Lecter. It wasn't like her to find him any excuse or any way out. She had such a strong disgust for him that he was surprised each time she was able to pronounce his name without gagging. Yet, she seemed genuine in her last sentence. At least, she was with Murasaki. She was, as a mother to a mother.

"Robertus," resumed Murasaki, "he just knew. Since the very first day Hannibal moved him, he was so good with him. So good to him. As if he could guess everything that was left unsaid. I was so careful around that boy. I feared he would break in an instant if I wasn't. But Robertus was so... Himself. So carefree. So eccentric. So human. I remember one day - Hannibal had been with us for about four weeks - the two of us were in the living room together, and we heard a huge crash sound coming from my husband's workshop. I knew, in a second, it was Hannibal. We were so afraid he had hurt himself, we rushed to the workshop. He was there, sitting on the floor, covered in paint from head to toe."

A vague smile appeared on Murasaki's lips, brought forward by the memory of sweeter times.

"I don't know how he did it. He must have tried to grab something and knocked down the shelf of paint. Thankfully he was not hurt, but there was paint absolutely everywhere, it was a literal puddle of colors. It was, of course, the cans of the most expensive paint Robertus had. And the splashes had ruined most of the canvas stocked in the workshop. Some on which Robertus had spent years of work. In other words, once we realized Hannibal wasn't hurt, we had all the reason to be angry. And I think Hannibal thought that too.

"He was... Not anxious, but very guarded with us. Very careful. Each time he was doing something, he would stare at us during the entire action, as if he was trying to gauge our level of anger or reprobation, to spot the first signs of incoming punishment. Even when we would ask him to do something, he would still stare and judge in silence.

"I could see he was doing the same. He was standing so still, even by his own standard. Staring at Robertus with an intensity he rarely had. For a second, I feared Robertus' rightful anger. I feared how Hannibal would react if he even simply raised his voice. But he didn't. He never did the wrong thing. He simply looked around at the spilled paints, then looked at me with a smile, and said "I knew my nephew was an artist". Then he took Hannibal in his arms, putting paint all over his suit. He allowed the boy to watch the floor from a higher point and asked him how he wanted to title his oeuvre. Hannibal didn't answer, of course. He simply looked at Robertus. With intensity. And hugged him back. After that, Robertus threw the wasted canevas, dried the paint on the floor and let it as it was. He said

the workshop needed a good sprucing up anyway. That was how Robertus was with Hannibal. How he had been everyday he got to spend with his nephew. I assure you, agent Crawford. Hannibal had nothing to do with my husband's death."

"I believe it, Lady Murasaki."

Crawford held Murasaki's eyes for a while, as a way to prove his sincerity. He had no tenderness for the Monster. He could tell the old woman still held some diluted version of affection, at least for the boy he once was. Jack was not making this mistake. They had been friend, a long time ago. Hannibal had been kind to him, had been warm. He had helped him out, had listened to him, had supported him. The night after Bella's suicide attempt, it was Hannibal who had drove him home, Hannibal who had cooked him dinner with the leftovers in his fridge, Hannibal who had packed Bella's suitcase for the hospital, Hannibal who had stayed overnight to watch over him, Hannibal who had been awake in the middle of the living-room when he had needed someone to talk to, and Hannibal again who had drove him back to the hospital the next morning, standing with him in silence during one of the hardest drive of Jack's life. The Monster had been a friend, just like he had been a son. But Jack had let go of him, had let go of the image of a man he thought he knew. And no, nothing was blinding him anymore, no excuse, no tenderness, no hope. He didn't understand Hannibal, how he worked, how he lived, how he could simply exist. But he didn't see him for what he wasn't anymore. Hannibal had acted as a friend, but had never been one. He didn't have it in him.

Maybe, one day, Lady Murasaki would learn that to. But it wasn't a journey that could not be rushed. It was a long, personal one, and the path was twisted.

"How was he, after his uncle's death?" he finally asked once Murasaki seemed slightly less guarded and defensive.

"I don't know how he was. He wasn't often sharing what he had on his mind. Or at all, really. What I know is what he became after. A killer."

"What do you mean?"

"What I said. A week after Robertus' funeral, he killed the man responsible for his uncle's death. His first act as the monster you believe him to be was to avenge the death of the man who saved him. At least I like to hope it was his first."

"Your husband was killed?" Alana asked.

"No. And yes. He died of a heart attack. That was provoked by a fight he was in. His opponent was not deemed guilty of the heart attack but, without him, my husband would still have shared some years with me."

"Your husband was the type to enter fights?"

Lady Murasaki had a small laugh at that question. One of her most genuine reactions since the beginning of their talk. If her feelings for Hannibal seemed maddeningly complicated, the ones she had for Robertus were simple.

"Not at all. I don't think he even understood the idea of violence. He would never raise his voice, never clench his fist. He was so... naive in many ways. Beautifully naive. One day, years before Hannibal, we were approached in the street. A group of young folks looking for trouble. And money. I don't think Robertus understood he was being assaulted. The concept was so out of his world. He simply talked to them as he would have to future friends, asking them about their whereabouts and their day. The men were so puzzled by my husband's total lack of normal, reasonable reaction. By the end of the evening, all of us were in a pub, talking about our lives and dreams. That was the kind of man Robertus had been every day of his life. Kind. Beautifully eccentric. And an unaware genius. I must say, Agent Crawford, Doctor Bloom, that I am not sad that that butcher was killed for taking Robertus away from this world. I simply hoped it could come from someone other than Hannibal."

"Why did he enter a fight?"

"I called him a butcher because he was. This man insulted me on the marketplace. Obscenely. Robertus heard of it. He confronted him. That indignation for my trampled honor ultimately killed him."

"How did Hannibal kill the butcher?"

"He took the katana we had in the house. And he decapitated the man. He left the body outside and brought the head back home."

"Who found it?"

"The body? The police found it. The head, it was me."

"How?"

"He put it where I would find it. Though I was not the one supposed to receive that gift. I have an altar in the attic. Where I pay my respect to my ancestors, and where I share a thought for the loved ones that parted. That's where I found the decapitated head. I think he meant it as a token of gratitude for my ancestors who let him use their weapon. And a payment for the disrespect I suffered."

"Not for his uncle's death?" noted Alana. "Only for the insult to you."

"I think it served both purposes. For Hannibal, disrespect was worse than death in many ways. And he was not one to believe in an afterlife. He didn't offer anything to Robertus because Robertus was dead and couldn't receive gifts anymore, nor apologies. I was alive."

"And the police never found Lecter?"

"They did. They contacted an investigator from Paris who consulted on the case. Inspector Popil. He found Hannibal in less than twenty-four hours. He brought him in the middle of the night for questioning."

"How did that inspector approach Lecter during that interview? And how did Lecter answer?"

"I don't know, I wasn't there. Hannibal asked to be alone with Popil. I don't know what was said, but he was released before the end of the night."

"He had been able to talk his way out of that case?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it had to do with the fact that I threw the head in front of the police station while he was being questioned. Either way, they released him with no charges."

Lady Murasaki's voice was cordial. Not cold, not defensive, but unapologetic. Though he could tell she had none of her son's cruelty, Crawford could recognize a grey morality when he was faced with one. He had one himself after all.

"You were Lecter's only family," he resumed. "Surely, they must have accused you right away."

"Surely they did. But none came after me."

"That's unthinkable. How could both of you get away with it?"

"Only indirect links could be made. And the butcher was hated by the local police. No one wanted to take the party of that violent pig against the poor thirteen years old orphan. Ultimately, they closed the case, and Hannibal wasn't even mentioned in the final report."

"He got to go on with his life."

"He did. Whether or not he deserved it, I don't know. But I would be lying if I were telling you I wasn't grateful for that small favor of fate."

Crawford could picture the kinds of feeling Murasaki had for that boy under her care. But he couldn't share them in any way. And all he was seeing was that, if the police had been impartial, if they had been thorough, Hannibal would have spent years in a psychiatrist hospital, and nothing of their shared tragic future could have taken place.

"What happened after that first kill?" Alana asked.

"Life. It all went back to normal. And I thought we had put it all to rest. Or I convinced myself that. Hannibal was growing fast, catching up with his peers. We lost Robertus' castle after his death so we moved to Paris."

"This castle isn't Robertus'?"

"Yes it is."

"You bought it back?"

"Hannibal did. A bit before his thirty. One morning, I received in the mail the title deed with my name on it. I moved back."

"How did Lecter react to the loss of the castle?"

"He found it unfair, but he didn't say much about it. We still had a bit of money from Robertus, and he had clearly known worse in his life than a Parisian flat. Though he didn't live there for long, as he moved for school."

"I thought he was homeschooled?"

"He was. Even after he started talking again, I didn't feel school was safe for him to go. I knew how violently he reacted to disrespect. And you know how kids can be. Hannibal was strange. He was so very still, his gaze so very intense. As a child, he used to talk with such a heavy accent that, trust me, had nothing to do with the one he has today. An accent of eastern Europe, in a western one that was taught to fear the cruel Soviet enemy. He also wasn't used to interacting with other kids. He didn't have their words, their interests, their behavior. I knew he wouldn't be left alone at school. And I thought it wasn’t a risk worth being taken. He was better off at home with me."

"Yet you sent him to school at fourteen," Jack pointed out. "What changed?"

"His level. He had always been more intelligent and knowledgeable than me, but there were no alternative teachings left for me to share with him. And I couldn't possibly help him through the art of medicine, so we decided it was time for him to leave the house."

"The art of medicine?"

"His anatomical drawings offered him a scholarship and he was admitted to Université Paris-Descartes."

"There’s a med school there," Alana informed Jack. "That's where he did his studies before his residency at Hopkins."

"Wait, at fourteen?"

"He was very precocious," simply answered Murasaki. "He moved to a small one-room flat above the faculty. His scholarship was enough to pay his rent, and he worked in the school morgue during the evening to pay for his food, his books, and his clothes. I wanted to help him, but he never accepted. I would have given him everything he wanted, but he never asked

for anything. I think he was angry at our situation. The fact that we had lost the castle, and most of Robertus' money. I think he thought I deserved better, and he didn't want to take a cent from me. I knew he worked hard during that time. I think he already had the firm intent to buy the castle back. I even learned he sold a lot of his drawings under a false identity to put aside some money. Still as of today, his arts are freely circulating on the market, no one knowing who the artist really is."

"It seems like a lot of work and a lot of independence for a fourteen years old," Jack commented. "It's quite the step from homeschooling."

"It was. But Hannibal was a very mature boy. I could already see the man he was becoming. And the more he was becoming that man, the more I was realizing he had never been a boy."

"Is that why you didn't live together anymore?" Alana softly asked. "You were both living in Paris. You could have shared a flat. But you didn't. You seemed willing to offer money to him but not companionship. Was it because he was making you uncomfortable?"

Lady Murasaki didn't answer. She detailed Alana, then Jack, as if trying to gauge whether or not any of them could understand.

"No. It was simply time for him to be independent."

She must have come to the conclusion that, no, they couldn't understand whatever had changed when Hannibal had started to turn into a man.

"So," resumed Jack. "It was hard, but I guessed he succeeded, since he ultimately became a doubly specialized doctor."

"Yes, his studies were a success. He validated his eight years cursus in four years. His mentor had a profound admiration for his capabilities, and he opened numerous doors for him. It's him who got his drawings to be published, him who found him a job at the morgue. It's also him who found him a residency at Hopkins."

"Why didn't he choose to do his residency in France? Why the US?"

"Why the US, I cannot say. But France was not an option for him anymore. We... had a bit of a falling out, I think you English speakers can say."

"What happened?"

Lady Murasaki sighed. So softly it could have been confused with a distant breeze.

"He had missed class for a week. His mentor called me. Hannibal was eighteen now but it was nothing like him and his teacher was very worried. His schoolmates had no idea where he was either. I went to his flat, and found all his belongings still there. No one had forced an entry, no one seemed to have touched anything in his flat. Everything was there. But Hannibal."

"You called the police?"

"No. I... had a hunch that, whatever it was, Hannibal wouldn't be helped by the police."

"What did you do, then?"

"Nothing. I knew Hannibal was following paths I couldn't walk. I waited for him. Two days later, he came back to his flat. He smelt like blood and smoke. And I knew."

"You knew he had killed."

"I knew what he was. You asked me when I understood. I guessed before that, I had whispers in my head. But I understood what he was that day. I understood why the cheeks of the butcher had been missing. I understood the stillness, and the silence of Hannibal. I understood the intensity of his gaze."

"What did you do?"

"I begged him. I begged him to stop. I begged him to forget. I begged him to rest. I told him he would lose himself. That I would lose him, and that I couldn't bear that idea. I told him that I needed him to come back to life. To stop his madness. I told him that everything could be erased. Everything could be forgiven."

"And what did he say?"

"He said he couldn't. He said he didn't want to. He said it felt right. It felt just."

"What did you do?"

"I left. I could see madness in his eyes, but it was a rightful one. I think he was on a path of revenge. Whatever he was doing, it was some form of retaliation."

"The one responsible for his parents' death?"

"Maybe."

"Is that how you knew he remembered what had happened."

"Yes."

"So, you did nothing."

"Yes. I knew he was beyond saving, but he wasn't beyond my love for him. I couldn't simply betray him. I couldn't turn my back. At least at first."

"What changed?"

"Him. Again. The day I saw him in his flat, the day he smelled like blood and smoke, I could see righteousness in his eyes. Two weeks later, the day he ate a man's face in front of me, it was amusement that I could see. He was done with his revenge, and now he was simply having fun. And that was when I knew I had to grieve the boy I thought I had known but who had actually died before I could even properly meet him. When Popil came for him, I did nothing to stop him."

"They arrested him?"

"Yes. And released him a few days later. They had no proof."

"You didn't testify?"

"No. I didn't lie. I didn't tell the truth. My silence was my parting gift to him that I had loved so dearly. And, at that point, words were beyond me anyway."

"Your parting gift?" Alana pointed out.

"Yes. I couldn't bear it any longer. My love for him, my fear for him, my hate for him. It was too much. Once he was released, I left for Japan with nothing but a word left in my flat. I abandoned him a month after he turned eighteen."

"But you received a letter from him," Jack commented. "The castle. You accepted that gift from him."

"This castle is Robertus'. Not Hannibal's. And I knew Hannibal was doing it for his uncle. And for the empty reflection of happier times."

"So, the last time you saw him was this day, when he was eighteen."

"I saw him again after that. In a newspaper. For a trial I didn't follow."

"You didn't watch any of it?"

"No. There was nothing there I didn't already know. And nothing that could make me feel any better about myself. Or about him."

"You didn't want to know the extent of the harm he had done?" asked Alana.

"What would have been the point? I could already guess it. Maybe even more accurately than his judges and juries. And I am not one to..."

"Wait a second."

It was Jack who had interrupted the conversation. He knew he was missing something. Something important.

Something on the back of his mind, whispering to him that he had to trade carefully. That he had to connect the dots quickly if he wanted to understand the situation.

"Apart from the letter, you haven't heard of Lecter once between his eighteen years of age and his trial."

"It's exact."

"Not once?"

"Not once."

"And you haven't followed the trial."

"I haven't."

"You haven't read an article, nor watched a video, nor heard an interview."

"I did none of those things."

"You're sure of that, you haven't heard anything from him until a trial you then hadn't cared to follow in any way."

"I am sure."

"Then how do you know what he sounds like?"

Lady Murasaki remained silent.

"What do you mean, Jack?" Alana asked.

Lady Murasaki knew exactly what he meant.

"You said his accent was much more pronounced as a child than it currently is. Ma'am, how do you know what Hannibal Lecter's accent sounds like?"

"Because I saw him after his trial."

Jack sensed all his muscles tensed, his blood rushing against his eardrum.

"When?"

"Two weeks ago."

Crawford could hear Alana's breath shrink back in her chest, a very recognizable fear in her eyes.

"He stayed for nearly two weeks," Murasaki resumed. "He left a few hours after you called to ask to see me."

Crawford jumped to his feet.

"You're fucking with me!"

"I answered your question."

"Yes! To give him enough time to run! Even after all he has done, you're still on his side?"

"I am not on his side. That doesn't mean I am on yours, agent Crawford."

"Bullshit! You can't just remain detached."

"I assure you, I can."

Lady Murasaki didn't fear Jack's outburst. There was nothing but quiet certitude in her black eyes. And Jack knew his words would remain powerless against someone like her.

"I hope your detachment will serve you well," he carefully articulated. "Let me tell you that I will catch your monster of a son, and make sure he gets the chair for the aberration that he is. And when he does, I may feel like asking the prison that will hold you for complicity to his crime to let you go visit his body at the morgue before we burn it off. Then, you can cry all

you want about the wasted childhood, the cruelty of the world, or whatever bullshit helps you live with what you've done."

Crawford stormed out of the room. Two days. It was the closest they had ever been from Lecter since the death of Dollarhyde. Yet, for someone like Lecter, two days were two eternities. Once in the gardens, he turned on his phone.

"Jack?"

Alana had followed him, her fear matching his anger.

"You, go back inside. Make sure Murasaki is not going anywhere."

Maybe she didn't deserve the harshness of his voice, but if he hadn't directed it at her, he would have had to direct it at himself. She went back inside while he dialed the number of his contact in Interpol.

He knew it was too late.

As the ringing was resonating inside his ear, he knew it was pointless. Hannibal had had less than a day when he had successfully escaped from the US. Twice. And the only times he had ever been found were when he had wanted to.

Yet, Jack had to do something. His powerlessness was insufferable for him. The powerlessness he had felt when he had watched Bella die, and it was the same as the one he felt when he was watching Hannibal live. In both cases, he could do nothing to prevent the injustice.

Nothing but dread the ringing of his phone and the blowing of the wind.

He could hear them both right now, as he had heard them both when they had taken her body, leaving the door of the house wild opened.

But there was something different now. A metallic taste in his mouth. And a metallic sound in the wind.

No, it wasn't his imagination. The wind sounded metallic. A small clicking punctuating its breath. He let his eyes follow the provenance of the sound. An orange tree. Shimmering under the sun.

Jack hung up the phone at the moment his call was answered. Carefully, he walked toward the tree. Yes, something was shimmering there, reflecting the light of the sun around the vivid oranges. Crawford looked around. No gardener in sight. He resumed his careful walk.

It was only when he arrived a few meters away from the tree that he finally understood what he was seeing. Needles. Dozens of them. Jabbed in the orange. One needle for one fruit. As if someone had tried to practice morphine injections on them.

Jack walked to the needle tree. A gift left behind by Hannibal. For him. He didn't touch any of it. The mere idea of this token of Hannibal's thoughts created a visceral disgust inside his gut. Yet, he spotted the letter right away. And he recognized the fancy cursive letters spelling his name. This ink had been spilled by Lecter's hand.

He retrieved the letter from the trunk where it had been fixed thanks to one last needle, but did not open it. The white envelope was already burning his skin, surely opening it would cost him his eyes. Yet, he couldn't let go of it. Just as Hannibal himself, Hannibal's gift would crawl under his skin and never let go of him.

Jack walked back to the entrance. He knew there was no point in calling Interpol. Hannibal was gone. And he could not be followed. They had come here for answers, not for the man himself. And they had gotten exactly what they had expected. Nothing more. Yet, it was doing nothing to quench his anger. Nothing to prevent his mind from spiraling toward deep ends that only Hannibal could create in one's thoughts.

When Jack spotted Freddie leaving the house, he had to put all his strength into not screaming his pounding heart out.

By the end of the conversation, he didn't know what she had said. He didn't know what he had answered. He didn't give a damn fuck about the petty journalist and her shitty tabloid. If she wanted to die on the endless hill that was Lecter, he would certainly not cry her, no more was he willing to cry the violation of Murasaki's rights and privacy.

But, by the end of the fruitless, meaningless conversation, he knew he had to read the letter. Because only Hannibal's words could still make sense in the midst of Hannibal's madness.

So he sat on the steps in front of the Monster's adoptive home, and read the letter.

A few minutes earlier

When Alana came back inside, she was not surprised to see that Murasaki didn't leave the room. The doctor knew she wouldn't run nor hide. It simply wasn't who she was.

However, the old woman was not in the armchair anymore. She had stood up and crossed the room. She was detailing one of the paintings that was hung on the wall. A painting Alana had seen her watched several times throughout their conversation. A lady bathing in a pond of water lilies.

Bloom walked to the old mother and stood by her side to detail the painting. The woman was stunning, her skin shinier than the water around her. Her long black hair creating a halo of night around her head, the water lilies stars in that darkness. Her naked breast, barely brushing the surface of the pond, was the center of circles of wavelets, as if the water was resonating with the beatings of her heart. Her face was one Alana knew.

"It's you."

"Yes."

And, for the first time since the beginning of their conversation, Alana could finally spot somewhere behind Murasaki's voice all the extent of the sadness that mother had kept inside of her.

"He painted it for you."

"He did."

Alana went back to the painting. She could see adoration in the precision of the face, veneration in the darkness of the hair, and yearning in the corrugation of the water licking the body.

"He loved you."

"So he thought. And so he said. Maybe he was right. Maybe he wasn't. It didn't matter. Ultimately, he chose his violence for the world over his love for me."

"Is that why you protected him today? Because of the love he had for you?"

"No. I didn't protect him. I didn't lie to you. I am not on his side anymore. I did not tell him you planned on coming. I thought that, if you were to find him here, then it was simply a risk he had brought upon himself. But, as often, he figured it out on his own. I don't know how he guessed, but he did. And he told me his goodbyes a few hours after Agent Crawford called."

Alana still had her eyes on the painting, but she was unable to see it anymore. All she could sense was the cloying remanences of Hannibal's presence against her skin. She could feel him everywhere in this house, could sense his gaze on her every gesture. She shouldn't have come.

"You are exhausted," said Lady Murasaki.

"The trip was long."

"No. Not that exhaustion. There is no accurate word I can use to describe it. But I meant that particular brand of exhaustion that comes with existing in a world where Hannibal exists too."

Alana knew that exact feeling. Her mind, her lips, her skin, her guts, all of her knew that feeling. Existing in a world where Hannibal existed too. It was slowly killing her, and all she could do was pray for someone to kill him faster.

"I am exhausted," she admitted.

"Whatever he has done to you, I am sorry."

"He had loved me."

Maybe not sincerely. And yes their story had been a means of retaliation against Will for him. But he had loved her. In a way.

"I sometimes can't help but believe that this is the worst he can do to someone. It is certainly the worst he has done to me. If he hadn't loved me, if I hadn't loved him, the world would have ultimately been a better place."

She turned away from the painting.

"I hope you will free yourself from him, Doctor Bloom. I know you can in ways I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I am his mother. I nurtured him. There are some things that can't be erased."

Slowly, she brought a trembling hand to her chest. As if she could feel there some residual warmth.

"I will always remember the feeling of his small head against me when he would fall sleep in my arms after a nightmare. I will always know how much he weighed the first time I carried him. And I will always hear in his voice the weak creaking it had when he said his first word to me."

She clenched her fist against her chest, as if it could reproduce the feeling of the weight of her son's head. But it was nothing more than her clenched fist.

Her eyes were filled with unshed tears of pain and joy when she looked at Alana again.

"I am doomed to our past. I will relive it, again and again, wondering what I could have done to save him. Or what I could have done to kill him. But you don't have to. You don't have to carry his ghost to the end."

"He had poisoned so many lives..."

Now, Alana was shedding the tears Murasaki couldn't.

"I know."

"It is unfair."

"It is. It has been since the very beginning. But you can still save yourself."

"What if I can't?"

Murasaki didn't answer. She simply passed her arms around Alana and both women, strangers really, clung to each other, desperate to find in the other the reflection of a possible salvation. And both women, for a minute, were able to forget that the arms that were currently holding them had also held their Monster.

Once she stepped back, Alana was more exhausted but also calmer than she had been in months. Murasaki had survived Hannibal. Maybe she could too. With her help.

But she still had a vicious anxiety in the depths of her mind. A blurred fear.

"I have one last question."

"Of course."

"It's about Will Graham."

They still had no idea what had happened to him. They knew Hannibal was alive thanks to the bodies he had left behind, but Will... There was simply no trace of him.

"It's a friend of mine. I don't know what happened to him. I wondered if Hannibal had talked about him during his time here. He may have referred to him as a former patient, or a colleague or a friend. Had he spoken of anyone that seemed to matter more than the others? Did he tell you what he did to him?"

"Will Graham..."

"Yes. You've heard of him."

"He was there."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Will Graham. Brown curly hair. Green eyes. The quiet type. With snarky remarks. Glasses, and a scar on his cheek. He was with Hannibal. They came together. And they left together."

"No."

She had had her doubts. When they couldn't find his body anywhere on the property. When Hannibal hadn't displayed it in the following days. She had had her suspicions. But none she was willing to acknowledge.

She took her phone out and showed a picture of Will to Murasaki.

"Please. Tell me it wasn't him."

Murasaki carefully looked at the picture, taking her time to detail it. Then she remained silent. She couldn't say it wasn't him without lying.

Alana brought her phone to her chest.

"How... How was he?"

"He is a friend of yours?" Murasaki asked instead.

"I don't know who he is. But he used to be a friend of mine. A very good friend."

Lady Murasaki seemed sorry when she delivered the news. Sorrier than she had been when she had covered up for Hannibal's monstrosity.

"He seemed happy."

"Happy with him?"

"Yes."

A silence settled.

Alana sat down on the sofa, her strength having left her.

"When you entered that room," resumed Lady Murasaki, " I could see myself in you. Right away. Before you even said a word. I couldn't see myself in him. No. It was Hannibal I could see in him."

"It can't be. He is nothing like him."

"I didn't say he was like him. I said I could see Hannibal in him."

Murasaki sat down next to Alana. The Doctor could feel the warmth coming from her, but it didn't reach her.

"He is a Nemesis of him. A extreme opposite. But also an equal. And opposites tend to look like each other. You can always recognize mirrored pictures. You can always link a view to its negative. And I could see Hannibal in Will Graham, just like I could see Will Graham in Hannibal. I guess that's what Hannibal wanted me to see. That was the reason he came back after all those years. He wanted my blessing, in some ways."

"Your blessing? For what?"

"For their wedding."

The cold shivers traveled Alana's body and left, letting a strange detachment settle instead. Will was gone. She had lost her friend.

"So, he loves him. Will Graham loves Hannibal Lecter."

"Yes. Enough to marry him. I think the idea came from Hannibal. He told me they found a way to do it in front of God, and I could see the laughter in his eyes. Yet, Will Graham obviously loved him enough to indulge him. And to model his life in response to Hannibal's twisted one. I won't celebrate their wedding. Hannibal didn't ask me to, and I would have refused. But I gave my blessing. I could tell both of them were already too ruined by their love. Nothing could be done to keep them safe from each other."

Both women stayed by each other's side in silence. Alana had nothing to add. Maybe, in a day, or in a year, she would find herself crying her lost friend, and wondering what she

could have done to save him. But right now, she could only feel cold and void in her heart. Which was far more pleasant than sadness and remorse.

"Are you the one to whom Hannibal gave his word?" asked Murasaki in the silence.

"What do you mean?"

"Will Graham told me something before leaving with Hannibal. He said that someone would come. Someone to whom Hannibal had made a promise. I first thought he was talking about Agent Crawford, but now, I don't think he was."

"He was talking about me."

"Then I have something for you."

She stood up and exited the room. Alana didn't go after her. She knew Jack had asked her to keep an eye on her, but, right now, she trusted Murasaki more than she trusted Jack himself. A couple of minutes later, the old woman came back, a phone in her hand. She handed it to Alana.

"What is it?"

"A phone."

"But who's?"

"Yours, since he gave it to you."

"What's inside?"

"I have no idea. A goodbye gift?"

Alana took the phone off her hand and stood up.

"I guess this is the end of it," she said.

"I guess it is."

"Thanks for your answers. And sorry for your losses."

"The same to you, Doctor Bloom. And good luck in saving yourself."

Both women parted without any last word, nor any last look. Nothing more was left to be voiced nor seen.

She found Jack sitting on the steps in front of the house. He had a piece of paper in his hand. She didn't ask. He was grateful for that.

They left with Freddie. That night, in her hotel room, way past midnight, Alana finally decided to take a look at the phone. Without even thinking about it, she entered her son's birthday as the code and it unlocked the phone. Of course it did. It was Will who had set it up for her. She realized quickly that it had nothing on it. No sim card, no internet access, no texts sent nor received. Nearly no memory of a former user.

Only the gallery where a video file could be read. A video left for her by Will.

Born a Monster, made a Monster: exclusive interview of the mother of Hannibal The Cannibal

When I entered the childhood home of Hannibal the Cannibal, I didn't know I would find there the answer to the sempiternal question of humanity. Are we born that way, or are we made that way? And the answer I found is that Hannibal the Cannibal is a Schrodinger's Monster.

Lady Murasaki and her husband adopted Hannibal Lecter when the future serial killer was only thirteen years old, and already they could tell that they were witnessing the uprising of a freak. A Monster.

"He simply didn't want to interact with the world," was what the adoptive mother had to say about her son when asked how he was. It was clear he was already damaged, or twisted, either from birth or from trauma. Could good parenting have changed things for the best? We will never know, since the parents refused their adoptive son's hospitalization and didn't give him the drugs and medicines prescribed by the doctors. Either by lack of care, or by fear of social stigma, it is left unknown. But maybe Robertus Lecter, the uncle and adoptive father, would have had reconsidered his choices if he had known that he would mysteriously die not even a year after adopting his nephew.

At the question "was he born that way", the adoptive mother had remained elusive at best. "You're asking if he was already monstrous then... Yes. And no." When it became obvious the adoptive mother had either no understanding of her son or no will to betray him, I deemed best to look for my own answer.

Every pedopsychiatrist will tell you, drawings are a good and useful diagnosing tool. That's what I found, in the attic of the Lecter's family. Drawings from a very young Hannibal the Cannibal (see opposite). I will let the most curious of my readers come up with their own analysis in the comment section. This journalist only delivers the information unaltered.

But, what was more, I did find something else in that attic. A dirty little secret hidden under the child's drawings. One that the world had yet to discover, and that Lady Murasaki had conveniently forgotten to talk about during our interview.

The Monster had a sister. Unequivocal pictures are proof of that. Proof that Hannibal the Cannibal grew up in the company of another child. A child who doesn't seem to have lived past her two years of age. Was Hannibal the Cannibal the one to blame for the death of that toddler? Was his sister his first victim? Or was she the one who turned him into a Monster? We don't know yet. And maybe we will never know. The eternal question of the chicken or the egg. What came first, Hannibal Lecter or his monstrosity?

In any case, this trip down memory lane taught me one thing. It is that we still have a lot to learn and a lot to write about Hannibal the Cannibal.

EXCLUSIVE PICTURES OF HANNIBAL THE CANNIBAL'S SISTER FOR OUR PREMIUM READERS

Dear Jack,

I hope this letter won't find you in any state of despair, except from the one created by the said letter.

I was most pleasantly surprised when it came to my attention that you intended to meet with Lady Murasaki. I'm guessing you are reading those lines after the meeting, and I am sure it has been informative and fulfilling. I know Lady Murasaki to be someone who speaks only in truths, even though she doesn't speak often. Whether or not you will be able to travel among her memories to find what you're looking for, I can't tell, but I hope you will let me know.

However, I must warn you, Jack. You won't find roots nor radices here. Evil has none. Remember that the Devil himself didn't emerge from the earth, for he merely fell from the sky. The best you could find here will be dust. Don't dismiss it. Dust is after all our beginning and our end. We all share that simple truth, and we are all brought together by it. Even you and I, Jack. What are we, if not brothers and betrotheds of dust?

I'm guessing you will come with Doctor Bloom. I can't picture our dear Alana declining answers, after being kept away from them for so long. Give her my best regards. Tell her I have been awfully busy this past year and have been unable to live up to my words. Tell her I apologize for my lack of diligence. But what can I say? Young life, overwhelming happiness, infinite possibilities, those can't be denied nor asked to wait.

As for you, Jack, I wish you a good life while it lasts. I know you must be eager to find me, but don't rush it. You still have some beautiful years to live, so don't hasten them Jack. Take the long path, enjoy the scenery, breathe in the fresh air, maybe share some parts of the journeys with loved ones. Don't run to the end, Jack. Trust me, the final stop will come soon enough and any wasted year of yours would profoundly sadden me.

Hoping you all the best, and all the wisest.

With clarity,

Hannibal Lecter

**The video begins.*

Outside, during the day. Will is walking, filming himself with one hand, the other one in his pocket. His eyes go from the phone to the path in front of him.

*He looks healthy. He has a huge scar mostly hidden behind his beard, but apart from that, he is not that different from before his supposed death**

I thought I would take you on a walk. I used to love walking with you. I thought it could make it a bit easier. Less... You know... Awkward.

He stops his walk and stares at the camera

It's not working. It's very awkward.

He resumes his walk

I thought about writing some stuff down. I even tried a couple of paragraphs. It was incredibly shitty. And it didn't feel right.

Hannibal says that letters are nearly polite. You deserve more than near politeness. So this is me, trying my best. Even though I'm not better at spoken words than I am at written ones.

I'm not even sure you will get to see this. Hannibal told me that Lady Murasaki would give it to you if I asked her. But I don't know. I think I won't tell your name to her. I want you to have a choice in it. To be able to lie and say that it is not for you. I want you to have the choice I didn't have when Hannibal sent me all those letters from jail. Though I'm not sure it's any better than what he did, really.

Will passes a hand in front of his eyes, massaging his forehead.

I guess there are many things I wish I could tell you, and many things I hope I could keep to myself. I don't really know what to tackle...

I guess... I am alive. I don't know if you knew. Or how much you guessed. But, now you're sure. I am alive. And nowhere near dying. At least not that I am aware of. And yes, I am here willingly. Hannibal is not forcing anything against me. He is not threatening me. He even stopped gaslighting me, which is always nice. I know you can't understand and you don't want to - by the way, you shouldn't - but... I am with him because I want to. I made that choice while he was dying.

Will walks in silence for nearly a full minute

We're getting married in a month. Which is crazy, when you think about it. I still can't wrap my head around that. It took two years for Molly to convince me to get married. She had all the arguments. The stability, the safety, the convenience. All the arguments Hannibal doesn't have. Yet, he just woke up one morning, said "let's tell God we're married" and I agreed. It's that easy, now.

His hand rubs his eyes violently, as if to chase away an illusion

I can't. Nothing makes sense anymore.

A smile can be seen behind his hand

And it's perfect. He is perfect.

He looks at the camera

I know there is no world where you can make sense of it but... He is beautiful Alana. And it's not some bullshit delusion from me. I know I sound like a crank in a fucking cult, but I am not. Or if I am, I don't care. Because, if my life now doesn't make sense, Hannibal does. Hannibal is meaningful. More than anything I had known before. And if he wants to get married, then let's fucking do it already, because we're far past that. He said we have modeled ourselves for each other. I guess he is right. And there is no coming back. I fought for so long, but I finally was strong enough to give up, and that brought me victory. He and I, I guess we're a thing now. And I am by his side as he is by mine. Which means that I will fight for us. And I will die for us. That's why that video is a goodbye.

His eyes fall back on his path

Yes, I think that's what it is. A goodbye. But there is something I need to tell you before we part. One last offering of peace. Not for us. For you.

You may think he is manipulating me. He is. Just as much as I am manipulating him. He is as submitted to me as I am to him. And I can influence him to my heart's desire.

Once again, he looks right back at the camera

Alana, I don't know if you noticed it, but I am keeping him away from you. Do you understand what that means? You're safe. Your wife is safe. Your child is safe. Hannibal is bound to my side, and he can't go after you. I promise you, Alana. No matter how deeply my metamorphosis takes place, how twisted my roots will become, I'll never forget those I used to be. I will keep Hannibal at bay. I am willing to be the safeguard between him and your world, if that means you'll get to live a happy life. But I can only do that if your world stays apart from us. If Jack comes after Hannibal, I will fight him. If you come after Hannibal, I will fight you. I can only keep you unscathed if you don't make me choose between him and the world. Because I will choose him. Anytime.

You are free, Alana. You can walk away, when I can't and won't. Please, I beg of you, live your life.

Free yourself from him, and I will save you from us. One last goodbye gift.

As for Jack, I don't believe he will listen. Though he should. Letting go of us is the best thing you could do. Morality, duty, those standards have no meaning when applied to us.

We are simply one of those aimless disasters that the hazards of nature have created in order to punish itself. There is no use in fighting wind and water. Live with us. It's the only way to live without us.

Take care Alana. And heal if you can.

The video ends

The car flies under the Cuban sun, following the curve of the coast. The scent of iodine is strong inside the car, its open windows letting the ocean in.

Two men are sitting on the seat. The driver wears a cotton pique white polo shirt, perfectly falling on his shoulder as if it was made for none other than him. Expensive aviator sunglasses protect his red eyes from the reflection of the sun on the road. He has one hand on the wheel, the other one resting on the open window, the hair of his arm burned by the unforgiving heat.

The second man has his face half hidden by a "I <3 Cuba" cap. His tee shirt, a simple grey one, seems to have been unloved and uncared for during its entire life. That second man also has one arm outside, his palm wild opened, trying to catch the wind, the sky and the ocean. His other hand is caressing the right thigh of the first man.

A song begins, the car radio blasting it loud enough for it to be heard above the sound of the speeding car, and of the wind rushing through the windows.

The first man reaches for the button to change the tune, but the second man slaps his hand away.

"Really" the first man mouths.

The second man doesn't answer.

Dog Days Are Over is being played between them, and will be until the end of the song, as the car flies under the Cuban sun.

Both men have no past. Both men have no roots. And both men have no explanation. No sense can be made of them. And there is no answer to them.

They just are.

And that's enough for them.

They are happy to be.

One man drives under the Cuban sun, and the other reaches out to catch the wind.

Disasters know of peace.

And those are the one they left in their trail that have to find a way to also be at peace with that.

End Notes

Here we are. Thanks for staying tuned.
Thoughts and prayers?

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!